

Drafted To Fight For The Country That Hurt Him

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Ruben Aguilar (right), 85, spoke with his friend Bill Luna, 77, about being deported to Mexico at age 6: "I grew up when that happened. From 6 years old, all of a sudden I felt like I was 15."

StoryCorps

Ruben Aguilar, 85, was forcibly deported from the U.S. 80 years ago as part of a largely forgotten [Mexican repatriation program](#) run by the American government.

During the Great Depression, hundreds of thousands of people of Mexican descent were forcibly deported to Mexico without due process, including many American citizens. Aguilar, an American citizen, was born in Chicago but was deported with his parents, who were undocumented. At the time, he was 6 years old.

"When I was deported, what I remember is the way that the agents crashed into the house: 'OK, people, line up against the wall,' " he tells his friend Bill Luna, 77, at StoryCorps in Chicago. They were then put into trucks, taken to the train station and shipped out to Mexico, where Aguilar had never been.

"I grew up when that happened. From 6 years old, all of a sudden I felt like I was 15," Aguilar says.

Aguilar could speak fluent English but not Spanish.

He returned to America when he was 18.

"I was an American citizen, so in 1945, I was drafted into the Army. My father explained to me, he says, 'You got a little card from Chicago to join the United States Army. You're going back to your country,' " Aguilar says.

"So I took the bus to the United States. It stopped in Laredo [Texas] before we take off for Chicago, and I asked the bus driver, 'Where is the washroom, sir?' And he said, 'Right around the corner.' So I go around the corner and I see a big sign: No Mexicans or dogs are allowed. And I said, 'Welcome back,' " he says. "It's a funny thing, because when I talk about it, you know, it looks like yesterday. Those things, you never get rid of that."

Luna asks: "How do you want to be remembered, Ruben?"

"I want to be remembered as somebody got hurt by his country, came back to this country and is going to die in his country."

Audio produced for Morning Edition by Michael Garofalo. Special thanks to Marlen Garcia.

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